



Testimony
Betsy Gara, Executive Director
Connecticut Council of Small Towns
Before the Labor & Public Employees Committee
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The Connecticut Council of Small Towns (COST) *opposes* HB-5262, AN ACT CONCERNING WORKERS' COMPENSATION COVERAGE FOR CURRENT AND FORMER UNIFORMED MEMBERS OF PAID OR VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT.

Although COST members have a tremendous respect for our firefighters, as drafted, this bill places an unsustainable financial burden on towns and their taxpayers.

Under current law, if firefighters are able to demonstrate a causal link between an injury and the job, workers' compensation benefits are available. HB-5262, however, creates a rebuttable presumption that certain cancers contracted by current and former paid and volunteer firefighters are job-related and, as such, compensable under workers' compensation.

This is a significant departure from current law and ignores long-standing public policy that requires demonstration of a causal connection between the job and the particular incident triggering the injury or illness. By shifting the burden of proof to municipalities, HB-5262 will impose a huge unfunded mandate on towns and cities. In assessing the fiscal impact of similar measures in previous years, the Office of Fiscal Analysis (OFA) has indicated that the cost of this mandate on towns and cities is highly variable depending on the 1) the frequency of claims filed and 2) the severity of the claim (e.g. the extent of medical treatment and lost wage benefits).

Given the difficult budgetary pressures facing Connecticut's municipalities, we are very concerned about any proposal that will increase costs on municipalities. For small towns, state aid to municipalities has been largely flat funded for many years. However, costs for providing critical services, including education, public health and safety, have increased dramatically.

Although towns are working hard to control local costs, declining revenues and increased costs associated with providing services is taking its toll. Expanding workers' compensation benefits at this time will further strain local budgets and put more pressure on towns to increase property taxes or make cuts in programs or personnel.

COST has recently been invited to participate in discussions with stakeholders to determine whether a compromise can be reached on this issue. The discussions have been productive and we are hopeful that the issue can be resolved in a way that does not overburden our communities and property taxpayers.

COST is an advocacy organization committed to giving small towns a strong voice in the legislative process. Its members are Connecticut towns with populations of less than 30,000. COST champions the major policy needs and concerns of Connecticut's suburban and rural towns.